

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, BG

SUBJ: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY MEETS

SUMMARY: THE JATIYO SANGSAD BEGINS A BRIEF SESSION TODAY; HOWEVER, IT SEEMS LESS CERTAIN THAN EARLIER THAT IT WILL BE ASKED TO CONSIDER CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS PROVIDING FOR PRESIDENTIAL GOVERNMENT. THE PRESSURE FOR CHANGE IS DIMINISHED AS BANGLADESH EMERGES FROM THE ANNUAL LEAN PERIOD. HOWEVER, INCREASED CENTRALIZATION AND MORE AUTHORITARIAN POWERS MUST BE A TEMPTING PROSPECT AS SHEIKH MUJIB SURVEYS THE DIFFICULTIES WHICH LIE AHEAD.
END SUMMARY.

1. BANGLADESH'S NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, THE JATIYO SANGSAD, RECONVENES TODAY (NOVEMBER 19) FOR A BRIEF FIVE-DAY SESSION. THIS MEETING HAS BEEN AWAITED WITH CONSIDERABLE ANTICIPATION SINCE THERE HAS BEEN GOOD REASON TO BELIEVE THAT PRIME MINISTER SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN HAD PLANNED TO UNVEIL HIS PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES. ALL REPORTS AND RUMORS HAVE SUGGESTED THAT UNDER THE AMENDED CONSTITUTION BANGLADESH WOULD BE GIVEN A PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT WITH SUBSTANTIALLY ENHANCED CENTRALIZATION AND A SUBSTANTIAL DOSE OF AUTHORITARIANISM.

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2. WHETHER OR NOT THE CHANGES WILL IN FACT BE INTRODUCED IS STILL UNCONFIRMED. A FEW EXTERNAL INDICATIONS CONTINUE TO SUGGEST THAT INTRODUCTION OF THE AMENDMENTS WILL OCCUR. FOR EXAMPLE, COMMUNIST PARTY OF BANGLADESH (CPB) LEADER MONI SINGH, WHOSE PARTY IS INCLUDED IN THE PEOPLE'S UNITED FRONT TOGETHER WITH THE NATIONAL AWAMI PARTY/MUSAFFAR (NAP/M) AND THE RULING AWAMI LEAGUE, TOLD A NOVEMBER 17 RALLY IN PALTAN MAIDAN THAT THE CPB WILL SUPPORT CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES SINCE PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY HAS FAILED. SOME DAYS EARLIER, THE BANGLADESH TIMES, WHOSE PROPRIETOR, SHEIKH MONI, HAS BEEN EXTREMELY CRITICAL OF MOST AWAMI LEAGUERS BUT WHO HAS NEVERTHELESS SPARED HIS UNCLE, THE PRIMIN, CARRIED A LENGTHY ARTICLE ARGUING THE CASE FOR A PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM. HOWEVER, THE LIST OF PROPOSED LEGISLATION ISSUED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS MINISTRY DOES NOT INCLUDE PROPOSED STRUCTURAL CHANGES AND AN OPPONENT OF THE PROPOSED AMENDMENTS SUGGESTS THAT THEY HAVE BEEN DEFERRED.

3. IF CHANGES ARE TO TAKE PLACE, PERHAPS THE TIMETABLE WOULD INCLUDE INTRODUCTION OF THE PROPOSED AMENDMENTS AT THE VERY END OF THE SESSION AND THEIR ACTIVE CONSIDERATION WHEN THE JATIYO SANGSAD MEETS AGAIN IN JANUARY. ACCORDING TO NEWS ITEM APPEARING YESTERDAY, THE AWAMI LEAGUE PARLIAMENTARY PARTY MEMBERS HAVE BEEN INSTRUCTED TO USE THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE SESSIONS TO EXPLAIN TO THEIR CONSTITUENTS THE NEW FOOD PROCUREMENT POLICY. IT WOULD BE AN EQUALLY GOOD TIME TO EDUCATE THEIR VOTERS AS TO THE NEED FOR A PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM.

4. WHATEVER PLANS ARE IN FACT REVEALED OVER THE COMING DAYS OF THE JATIYO SANGSAD SESSION, IT OPENS WITH THE PRIMIN IN A MORE OPTIMISTIC FRAME OF MIND THAN WAS EVIDENT OVER MUCH OF THE LAST THREE MONTHS. THE PERIOD OF SEVERE FOOD SHORTAGE HAS BEEN WEATHERED: THE AMAN CROP HAS BEGUN TO BE HARVESTED; ARRIVALS OF FOODGRAINS FROM ABROAD--VIRTUALLY NIL DURING SEPTEMBER AND MUCH OF OCTOBER--HAVE RESUMED; DESPITE STARVATION IN MANY PLACES, THE POLITICALLY--CONSCIOUS MIDDLE CLASS WAS PINCHED ONLY BY HIGH PRICES RATHER THAN BY HUNGER WHILE THOSE SERIOUSLY AFFECTED WERE TOO WIDELY SCATTERED OR TOO INSIGNIFICANT IN BENGALIAN TERMS TO MATTER. THERE WERE A NUMBER OF DIPLOMATIC "TRIUMPHS," SUCH AS UN ADMISSION, SHEIKH MUJIB'S VISITS TO EGYPT AND KUWAIT, AND SECRETARY KISSINGER'S VISIT. LASTLY, THE EFFORTS OF THE OPPOSITION TO CAPITALIZE

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ON THE BDG'S TROUBLES WERE UNAVAILING. IT IS THIS EUPHORIA WHICH IS SAID TO HAVE PROMPTED DEFERMENT OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES.

5. SHEIKH MUJIB'S OPTIMISM MUST, HOWEVER, BE TEMPERED BY THE KNOWLEDGE THAT HE HAS BEEN ABLE TO GAIN NO MORE THAN A MEASURE OF TIME, AND THAT HIS MARGIN FOR ERROR HAS BEEN REDUCED AS A RESULT OF THIS YEAR'S CRISIS. A MASTER IN THE ART OF AGITATIONAL POLITICS, HE RECOGNIZES THE KINDS OF SITUATIONS AND ISSUES WHICH

WOULD OFFER HIS OPPONENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO UNDERMINE HIS POSITION, AND IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT HE WAS DEEPLY TROUBLED OVER THE PAST MONTHS. HIS FIRING OF TAJUDDIN AND A REPORTED SUBSEQUENT WARNING TO THE REMAINING CABINET MEMBERS THAT HE IS AWARE OF THEIR MANEUVERINGS WAS INTENDED TO THWART ANY POSSIBLE INTRAPARTY THREAT. HIS RECENT NEGOTIATIONS WITH SUCH ELEMENTS OF THE OPPOSITION AS THE JATIYO SAMATANTRIK DAL (JSD) FOR THEIR INCLUSION IN A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY IS ANOTHER ASPECT OF HIS EFFORTS TO PROTECT HIS POSITION--AND POWER. AT THE MOMENT, HIS OPPONENTS APPEAR TO BE ON THE DEFENSIVE. WE HEAR NOTHING OF TAJUDDIN, IF ONLY FOR THE MOMENT. THERE ARE NO SIGNS OF CABINET UNREST, AND WE HEAR THAT ANY POSSIBLE CABINET SHAKEUP OR CHANGE NOW LIES FURTHER IN THE FUTURE. THE NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE OPPOSITION ELEMENTS DEMONSTRATE THEIR RECOGNITION THEY HAVE YET TO FIND A WAY TO CAPITALIZE ON THE GRIEVANCES OF THE INFLATION-STRICKEN MIDDLE CLASS AND THE RURAL INDIGENT.

6. MUJIB HAS, HOWEVER, ONLY BOUGHT TIME. DEFECTIONS FROM THE NAP/M SUGGEST THAT THE SUPPORT OF HIS PRESENT ALLIES CANNOT BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED. THE JSD, ANXIOUS TO REMIND THE PRIMIN THAT IT CANNOT BE IGNORED, HAS CALLED FOR A HARTAL ON NOVEMBER 26, AND THERE IS NO PRESENT REASON TO DISMISS THE LIKELIHOOD OF AT LEAST PARTIAL SUCCESS. AND WHILE THE BEST MONTHS OF THE YEAR LIE IMMEDIATELY AHEAD, NEXT YEAR'S LEAN PERIOD MUST BE PREPARED FOR. CHANGES IN THE FORM OF GOVERNMENT WILL BE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR THE ADMINISTRATIVE VIGOR AND ELAN AND HARD POLICY DECISIONS REQUIRED.

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